

TRACES OF EARLY *PUROHITA* KNOWLEDGE  
IN THE *KAUṬILĪYA ARTHAŚĀSTRA*

It is by now an widely accepted view that *purohitas* most certainly largely contributed to the evolution and early formation of political science in India<sup>1</sup> although due to the lack of research into pre-Kauṭilyan literary sources it is yet difficult to make out to exactly which extent and in what way political theory was framed by them.

In 1968 W. Ruben had drawn the attention to an episode from the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*<sup>2</sup> (AB) which, as he suggests, contains some

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<sup>1</sup> See R. P. KANGLE, *The Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra*, Pt. III, A Study, University of Bombay, 1965, pp. 8-11, where also earlier literature is cited; M. SCHETELICH, "Der Weg zur Konsolidierung des *brāhmaṇavarṇa* als oberster Stand der altindischen Gesellschaft, dargestellt am Beispiel des *purohita*", in *Indiens Rolle in der Kulturgeschichte = Sitzungsberichte der Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR*, 12 G, Berlin 1980, pp. 89-121; A.W. STARGARDT, *Ancient Indian Theory: The Kauṭalīya Arthaśāstra. Monographs in Asian Diplomatic History*, Revised ed., Cambridge, 1988, pp. 5-6

<sup>2</sup> AB 8.28, *brāhmaṇasya parimaraḥ*. See W. RUBEN, *Die gesellschaftliche Entwicklung im alten Indien*, Bd. II: *Die Entwicklung von Staat und Recht*, Berlin 1968, p. 57: "Der Brahmane Maitreya Kauśārava lehrte seinen König Sutvan Kairiṣi den Zauber des "Ringsherumsterbens" der Feinde....; dieser (vermutlich der König) befolgte die Regel, wenn sein Feind stände, ebenfalls zu stehen; nur wenn sein

early reflections of a *purohita* on political behaviour and which might well mark the beginning of statecraft (Staatslehre). In fact, there are similarities of terminology in this AB passage and the *śāḍgunyam* parts of the Kauṭīliya *Arthaśāstra* (KA)<sup>3</sup>.

Now, if any early text could be expected to contain references to political thinking or political theory, it should be AB, for more than any other *Brāhmaṇa* it is concerned with the king's (resp. the *kṣatram*'s) sphere. It deals extensively with the king's ritual affairs: with the *rājasūya*, with different kinds of *abhiṣeka* ceremonies as well as minor royal rites and (at the very end of the text) explicitly also with the field of activity of the *purohita*. The "historical" or semi-historical episodes cited to confirm the efficacy of the *ainDRAMAHābhiṣeka* rite amply testify to the political-cum-ritual role of *purohitas*, to their function as personal political advisor of their kings. And not only that: already in the AB we meet with terms like *mitra*, *amitra*, *yogakṣema* or *abhaya* which later on in political theory became termini technici or from which (due to a similar underlying concept) political termini technici were developed by freeing the words from their ritual relevance and giving them a political connotation<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, in search for the "prehistory" of KA terminology it seems possible to draw a line from AB to KA although this line for the time being remains rather hazy, for lack of research on textual evidence for the gradual evolution of political terminology.

But if *purohita* knowledge and the *purohita*'s practical, political and ritual experience really were part of the background on which political science evolved - which I am sure, they were, given the many examples from the *Brāhmaṇas* where *purohitas* acted as a

Feind säße, sich auch zu setzen, und wenn jener wachte, selber zu wachen; und halle der Feind einen steinernen Kopf, er würde den Feind niederwerfen. Fünf Könige seien durch jene Magie des Brahmanen um ihn herum gestorben. Da verbindet sich priesterliche Magie mit politischer Klugheit; man kann hier wiederum geradezu vom Anfang der Staatslehre sprechen".

<sup>3</sup> M. SCHETELICH, "Zu den Anfängen altindischer Staatslehre", in *IT* 8-9 (1980-81), Torino, pp. 980-81, 377-84.

<sup>4</sup> For instance *vijitin* (7.3.6), *antar-dhā* (8.5.5), *acchidram śarman* (8.5.4) or *pratyakṣa-parokṣa* (7.4.8).

kind of *dūta* or *mantrin* to kings -, a question arises: did any traces testifying not only to the *purohita*'s proficiency in ritualistic reasoning (which Oldenberg rightly called prescientific science) but also to their playing a part in working out political terminology survive in the KA? In other words, could a line be drawn not only from the AB to KA but also back from KA to AB?

There is at least one instance from the Kauṭīliya which seems to be helpful for the problem, namely the end verse of chapter 1.9, "The Appointment of Councillors and Chaplains" (*mantripurohitotpatih*), a skilfully made little piece of didactic poetry, ambiguous by its intricate texture, and therefore a hard nut to crack - for KA translators as well as for the Indian commentators. The *śloka* runs:

*brāhmaṇenaidhitam kṣatram mantrimantrābhimantritam/  
jayaty ajitam atyantam śāstrānugamaśastritam//*  
( v.1: G2, M *śāstrānugata*-, G2 *-śāstrikam*)

Kangle translates: "Kṣatriya power, made to prosper by the Brahmin (chaplain), sanctified by spells in the form of the counsel of ministers, (and) possessed of arms in form of compliance with the science (of politics), triumphs, remaining ever unconquered".

And he comments: "*edhitam* and *mantrimantrābhimantritam* contain a punning reference to the kindling of fire and its sanctification by *mantras*". Cb renders *abhimanrita* by "protected". *-śāstrānugamaśastritam* "possessed of weapons in form of obedience to the *śāstra*" (Cb). Cj however explains "following the *śāstra* (*śāstranugam*), though not making use of weapons (*śastritam*)". Jolly-Schmidt refer to a pun, apparently in the word *śastrita* "possessed of a weapon" and "accompanied by a hymn of praise or litany (*śastra*)". The reading *-nugama-* is obviously better than *nugata-*".

Meyer translates: "Wenn die Kriegerschaft (1) vom Brahmanen gefördert und vom Rate der Ratgeber beraten wird (2), so siegt sie, selber immerdar unbesiegt (3), folgt sie nur der Lehre, auch ohne Wehre".

And he comments: (1): *Oder*: das Königtum, die Könige. Über die Minister, den Ratgeber (*mantrin*), die Ratgeber (es sind deren drei oder vier), das Ratgeberkollegium und die Unterschiede und

Aufgaben der einzelnen hat lichtvoll Stein gehandelt (Megasthenes und Kautilya, 175ff.).

(2): Dies schiene hier der natürliche Sinn von *abhimanrita* zu sein. Nach der gewöhnlichen Bedeutung aber: "geweiht, schützend gefeiert wird", wozu die von Gaṇ. verzeichnete Lesart *abhirakṣita* vorzüglich stimmt.

(3): Oder: ersiegt sie unendliches Unersiegtes (d.h. macht sie endlose neue Eroberungen). Kangle's as well as Meyer's comments on their resp. translations make evident their difficulties in correctly understanding the *śloka*, particularly the last *pāda*, and therefore, as is often the case, their translations do not agree.

In Meyer's interpretation, the verse is a praise of political shrewdness as opposed to military force and thus excellently fits in with the tendency of the *Arthaśāstra*'s *daṇḍanīti*: to base any kind of political action on *mantraṇa*, i.e. thorough discussion of a given situation by the king together with a group of councillors (*mantrin*) and to prefer diplomatic action to making war.

Kangle rather takes the *śloka* to be an extension of the description of the *purohita*'s office (and his qualifications) which forms the second part of chapter 1.9, so that the verse sort of sums up this second part by further dwelling on the relation between *purohita* and king, mentioned in the preceding two sentences. In his interpretation, the verse thus once more defines the role of each of them in the main business of the *Arthaśāstra* king: extension of his sphere of political influence (*vardhana*).

To both Meyer and Kangle it did not occur that the ambiguity of the *śloka* might have been intended and that possibly its author deliberately left the verse open to be understood in different ways. What makes me think so, is the fact that - for putting forth his point - the author evidently recurred on the old *purohita* knowledge of the AB, namely on the well-known allegorical story of the flight of the

sacrifice from the *brahman* and the *kṣatram* and its conquest by the weapons of the *brahman* only<sup>5</sup>.

This allegory, being a kind of preamble to the description-cum-interpretation of the *abhiṣeka* rites, was originally told to demarcate the field of activity and the responsibilities of the royal and the priestly function (*kṣatram* and *brahman*) and at the same time to stress their union and interdependency in the business of guiding the state and its subjects<sup>6</sup>. It runs: "Om! Prajāpati created the sacrifice. When the sacrifice was created, both the *brahman* and the *kṣatram* were created after him. After the *brahman* and the *kṣatram* two kinds of living beings (or: people, in the sense of: subjects, *prajā*) were created: those who eat sacrificial food and those who don't. The eaters of sacrificial food followed the *brahman* (lit. went after

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<sup>5</sup> AB 7.4.1=7.19 (7th *pañcika*, 3rd *adhyāya*, 1st *khaṇḍa*: *rājasūye yajamānādhyāya, tatra kṣatriyasya yajñādhikāra*). The text, and particularly the "purohita parts", are difficult to date. Th. AUFRECHT (*Das Aitareya Brahmana. Mit Auszügen aus dem Commentare von Sāyaṇācārya und anderen Beilagen* hrsg., Bonn 1879, IV) refers to Book 7 and 8 as additional to the original subject, the functions of the *hotṛ* at the *jyotiṣṭoma*, but does not say anything about the "additional parts" being younger or older as the first six *pañcikas*. In any case the AB is generally taken to belong to the oldest *Brāhmaṇas*, roughly dated into the 9th-8th cent. B.C.

<sup>6</sup> The historical background of the allegory is that early stage of history and that early type of society where the access to power or the access to religio-ritual knowledge and to the operation of sacrifices was not yet restricted to hereditary groups of definite social ranks. *Rājanya*, *brāhmaṇa* and *vaiśya* were functional groups, and to be included into one of them was not yet a question of birth but of the necessary qualification, i.e. of the intellectual or economic background respectively. A man was a *rājanya* because of his *śraīṣṭhya* and *jyaiṣṭhya* among the members of the community. In the same way *-veda* (knowledge) of the *trayī vidyā* (AB 5.5.7 and 5.5.8 already for the three Vedas), of *sāmans* and *mantras* (together with their effects and ritual significance) made a man fit for the office of priest. The number of kings mentioned in the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Upaniṣads* as teachers of religious and ritual knowledge is immense, and the contests between kings and priests for showing off their superiority in interpreting rituals were many (see, e.g., W. RUBEN, *Wissen gegen Glauben*, where the different proto-philosophical teachings evolving from such intellectual intercourse are amply dealt with). Thus, to demarcate of the fields of competence, expressed by the relation between the sacrificial sphere - represented by *brahman* (sacrificial word, i.e. knowledge, vested in its functionaries, the *brāhmaṇas*) and the sphere of political power represented by the *kṣatram* - was an affair of vital importance - socially as well as politically.

him), the non-eaters followed the *kṣatram*. Now, those living beings who are eaters of sacrificial food, these are the *brāhmaṇa*, and those, who are non-eaters, these are the *rājanya*, the *vaiśya* and the *śūdra*. From these the sacrifice ran away. Him followed the *brahman* and the *kṣatram*. Which weapons were the *brahman*'s (weapons), with these the *brahman* went after him. Which weapons were (those) of the *kṣatram*, with these the *kṣatram* (did the same). These are the weapons of the *brahman* what are the weapons (called) sacrifice. Now, these are the weapons of the *kṣatram*, what are horse, chariot, armour, arrow and bow. The *kṣatram*, not catching up with it<sup>7</sup>, turned back (or better: abstained - from following the sacrifice). Frightened by his (i.e. the *kṣatram*'s) weapons it (i.e. the sacrifice) went far away. After it went the *brahman*. It overtook it (the sacrifice). When, overtaking it, it (the *brahman*) had stopped it in running far away, it stood still. (The sacrifice), overtaken, stopped from running far away, standing still, recognizing his own weapons, took shelter with (or: approached) the *brahman*. Therefore, verily, the sacrifice has its firm footing in the *brahman*, in the *brāhmaṇas*. To him came the *kṣatram*. It said: "Invite me to this sacrifice!" It (the *brahman*) said: "Be it so!" Then it said: "Laying aside thy own weapons, with the weapons of the *brahman*, in the form of *brahman*, becoming the *brahman*, approach the sacrifice!" "Be it so!" it (the *kṣatram*) said. That *kṣatram*, laying aside his own weapons, with the weapons of the *brahman*, in the form of *brahman*, becoming the *brahman*, approached the sacrifice. Therefore, verily, a *kṣatriya* wishing to sacrifice approaches the sacrifice having laid down his own weapons, with the weapons of the *brahman*, in the form of *brahman*, becoming the *brahman*"<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> The verb *āp-* means "catching up with, overtaking something or somebody", but also "taking possession of", and both meanings are apparently intended. The idea behind it is taken from the warrior's *dharma*: if somebody is defeated in a fight, he is regarded as being at the mercy of the victor, having to obey him like a dependent person.

<sup>8</sup> AB 7.4.1 (7.19): *Om/ Prajāpatir yajñam-asṛjata/ yajñam sṛṣṭam anu brahmakṣatram asṛjyetāṃ/ brahmakṣatram anu dvayyaḥ prajā asṛjyanta/ hutādaś cāhutādaś ca/ brahmaivānu hutādaḥ kṣatram anv ahutāda/ etā vai prajā hutādo, yad brāhmaṇā/ athaitā ahutādō, yad-rājanyo vaiśyaḥ śūdras/ tābhyo yajña*

It is clearly this legend which the *Arthaśāstra* verse takes up. We not only meet with motifs from the AB story (the *brahman-kṣatram* duality, the unarmed *kṣatram*, the spiritual weapons as opposed to the military ones shared by both *brahman* and *kṣatram* in common) but also with AB terminology:

- for *mantram abhimantray*- see AB 8.4.5 et al.;

- for *kṣatram jayaty* see AB 8.5.2 and 8.5.4 (*yasyaiva vidvān brāhmaṇo rāṣṭragopaḥ purohitaḥ kṣatreṇa kṣatram jayati, balena balam aśnute*);

- for *atyantam* see e.g. AB 8.4.9 et al. (*sumantaṃ sarvataḥ pṛthivīm jayan*).

Yet it is not the supremacy of *brahman* or *kṣatram* which is at stake here. The original legend from the AB is completely stripped off its religious-ritualistic content and turned into a praise of *mantraṇa*, careful deliberation on a given situation. The *kṣatram* (the king), it is said, is protected (*abhimantrita*) by deliberation against evil (and everybody familiar with the usual, religious notion of the verb, adds: as thoroughly as by sacrifices conducted by the *brahman*). But then *yajña* is explicitly substituted by (*artha-* or *daṇḍanīti-*) *śāstra*, i.e. secular political knowledge, which becomes, accordingly, the befitting weapon for achieving any gain, and it is the *mantrin*, the councillor, not (only) the spiritual guide who handles *mantra* the effective means of protection. Thus the retelling of the old AB legend (almost its inversion) by the KA author sets a mark in the process of evolution of political science. With an elegant

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*udākramat/ tam brahmakṣatre avaitāṃ/ yāny-eva brahmaṇa āyudhāni tair-  
brahmānvaidd/ yāni kṣatrasya taiḥ kṣatram/ etāni vai brahmaṇa āyudhāni yad-  
yajñāyudhāni/ athaitāni kṣatrasya āyudhāni yad aśva rathaḥ kovaca iṣu dhanva/ tam  
kṣatram ananvāpya nyavartata/ āyudhebhya ha smāsyā vijamānaḥ parāṃ evaity/  
athaināṃ brahmānavait/ tam āpnot/ tam āptvā parastān niruddhyātiṣṭhat/ sa āptaḥ  
parastān niruddhas tiṣṭhañ jñātvā svāny āyudhāni brahmopāvartata/ tasmād dhāpy  
etarhi yajño brahmaṇy eva brāhmaṇeṣu pratiṣṭhito/ 'thainat kṣatram anvāgacchat/  
tad abravīd upa mā 'smin yajñe hvayasveti/ tat tathety abravīt/ tad vai nidhāya  
svāny āyudhāni brahmaṇa evāyudhair brahmaṇo rūpeṇa brahma bhūtvā yajña  
upavartasveti/ tatheti tat kṣatram nidhāya svāny āyudhāni brahmaṇa evāyudhair  
brahmaṇo rūpeṇa brahma bhūtvā yajñam-upāvartata/ tasmād dhāpy etarhi  
kṣatriyo yajamāno nidhāyaiva svāny āyudhāni brahmaṇa evāyudhair brahmaṇo  
rūpeṇa brahma bhūtvā yajñam-upāvartata/*

and easy spring from religious to secular reasoning it creates a political connotation of former religious words, thus giving qualitative changes in political concepts a verbal shape and a new (*śāstric*) frame. This happens:

- with regard to the king's moral: *yuddha* (fighting) is substituted by *mantraṇa* (intellectual reasoning), to be the chief quality of a king's right behaviour from now on,

- with regard to the concept of kingship: the *kṣatriyadharmā*-oriented warrior-king of the *Dharmasūtras* is substituted by the statesman-king using his brain in addition to force for achieving political gain, i.e. using the *śāstra* instead of the *śastra*.

- with regard to the role of the *purohita*: he is no longer the main guide of his king in spiritual as well as political matters, but is only one of the members in the assembly of councillors (*mantripariṣad*).

Thus the verse could be translated:

"Made to prosper by the *brahman*, protected by the *mantra* of those who possess the knowledge in it, the *kṣatram* is victorious everywhere, not subdued, by following the *śāstra* (i.e. political advise) without taking up arms (and conquering others by military force)".

Nevertheless, *formally*, the verse, because of the structure of its last *pāda* could (by those familiar with *Brāhmaṇa* knowledge) well be taken as a reverence to the *brahman* resp. the *brāhmaṇas*. *Brahman* and *mantra* could, as before, be understood as interrelated, and *śāstrānugamaśāstritam*, irrespective of how the words are divided, exactly reproduces the old AB topos, only with another background. Now, whether one reads *-śāstrānugama śāstranugam* suddenly becomes of secondary importance, although *metri causa* the latter reading is to be preferred to the first as the "purer" variant.

The small piece of didactic poetry from KA 1.9 might well be taken as a good example for the skill of *arthaśāstrins* in introducing new ideas in the garb of traditional images by combining prose and verse. At the same time it demonstrates a delicate way of theoretical reasoning which the *Dharmaśāstras* from Manu onwards are totally lacking. In this respect the KA is closer to the *Dharmasūtras*, although these texts are not interested in coining new political ideas



and terms, due to the *dharmasūtrins* practical rather than theoretical interests in things of political relevance. Anyway, the *Dharmasūtra* teachers share with the KA the method of citing different persons' views as well as the use and adaptation of *Brāhmaṇa* portions (which they, in contrast to the KA, mostly mark by *iti brāhmaṇah*)<sup>9</sup>. This might support the claim of an early date at least for portions of the text like the verse discussed above.

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<sup>9</sup> This his will be discussed in a separate notice on *kathā*.